

Aesthetic dissonances in the local urban context – eclectic spaces and street advertising

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Abstract: This article presents a critical analysis of the contemporary urban visual landscape, focusing on the aesthetic dissonances generated by chaotic eclecticism, invasive advertising, and the stylistic fragmentation of the built environment. Drawing from an artistic research approach based on the *dérive* method, the text explores how urban imagery shapes the everyday perception of the city and contributes to the construction of a collective imaginary. The case study centres on the city of Iași, viewed through the lens of a local resident who maps frequently travelled routes, observing recurring elements that define the visual character of the spaces encountered. These visual dissonances are interpreted not merely as the result of negligent urban planning but as symptoms of complex historical, economic, and cultural processes. They are discussed in relation to the phenomenon of urban kitsch, without being entirely reduced to it, as they also exhibit features tied to a specific morphology inherent to post-communist urban spaces. Street advertising, commercial clichés, and fragmented forms of aestheticisation become markers of an urban aesthetic dominated by simulacra, visual oversaturation, and a constant competition for attention. In this context, the city no longer functions as a coherent and authentic space, but rather as a visual collage in which architectural and cultural landmarks are often overshadowed by aggressive commercial messaging. The article argues for the necessity of an urban development strategy that is more attuned to local identity and visual coherence, highlighting the importance of exploring the urban space as a critical and transformative act – one capable of shaping perception, behaviour, and the emotional connection to a place.

Keywords: visual eclecticism, urban aesthetics, kitsch, street advertising, spatial fragmentation.

1. Introduction

The visual fragmentations of the city are more than just aesthetic shortcomings – they reveal the lack of a coherent vision of urban development. These dissonances are the product of a complex interaction between economic, cultural and political factors, which shape both the organization and the perception of urban space. Moreover, the visual elements that constitute these aesthetic dissonances contribute to the impression of a fragmented, incoherent, eclectic, oversaturated, artificial and, at times, kitsch environment. From a

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subjective perspective, these dissonances could be included in the category of kitsch, but the same degree of subjectivity does not allow for a strict labelling, since they do not fully reflect the characteristics of kitsch, but can be part of the natural morphology of urban space. For this reason, they are analysed as a distinct category, with their own mechanisms of manifestation and influence on urban space.

Invasive advertising, urban clichés and uncontrolled eclecticism not only fragment the aesthetic coherence of the space, but also influence the way in which residents and visitors relate to it. As these dissonances accumulate, they are no longer perceived as exceptions, but become an integral part of the urban landscape. Thus, the identity of the city begins to be associated with these standardized elements that often do not reflect the authentic character of the place, but rather trends imposed by economic factors or superficial urban decisions.

Thus, eclecticism, street advertising and urban clichés become subjects of analysis, as these are the most obvious types of aesthetic dissonance on the route I travel most often in my experience as a city dweller. This observation is not just a subjective study of a personal route, but a relevant example for the entire city and, by extension, for other cities in Romania and even the world.

Inspired by the *derivé* method¹, I believe that this kind of exploration can become a method for the artistic research of space, closely connected to urban psychogeography². The *derivé* allows for direct observation of how visual elements in a city influence the individual's path and perception of public space, and this aspect determines “the importance of exploring space as a critical and transformative act.”³ Urban images, whether harmonious or fragmented, play a significant role in the way we relate to the city, involuntarily orienting our daily experience and the way we interact with the built environment.

Although the *derivé* involves a spontaneous exploration of space, without a pre-established route, we started from the premise that the perception of a place influences not only the spontaneity of the route, but also our psychological and emotional state and attitude towards that space. The city is not just a physical setting that we walk through, but also a set of recurring images that shape our spatial memory and the way we identify and classify places. The dominant visual

¹ *Dérive* (from the French “drifting”) is a concept developed by Guy Debord and the Situationist International in the 1950s that designates a technique of urban exploration through spontaneous movement, without a fixed route, guided by the attractions and ambiance of the space. The purpose of drift is to analyse the influence of the urban environment on behavior and emotions (psychogeography), to challenge the perceptions imposed by the modern city. The practice of drift involves exploring and documenting experiences through subjective maps.

² Psychogeography is the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (organized or not, consciously) on the emotions and behavior of individuals.

³ Dan Acostioaei (2024). *Atitudini performative în arta site-specific* [Performative attitudes in site-specific art], Prinhaus, Iași, p. 73.

elements in a given space – be they architectural, graphic or related to urban artistic interventions – become landmarks that not only physically guide us, but also contribute to building a collective imaginary of the city. Thus, the urban experience is not neutral, but deeply subjective, conditioned by the repeated encounter with the same images, textures and structures that come to define the way we relate to a place, whether it is familiar or unknown.

That is why I started from a pre-established route, the one I travel most often. Thanks to the Google account's timeline options, which automatically save location history (with the user's consent), I was able to observe, overall, which part of the city I cross most frequently and how this repetition of the route influences me. Thus, I analysed over the course of a year the areas I visited repeatedly, managing to illustrate, with approximation, the weight of these visits and the way I relate to the city from the perspective of my experience as a resident of Iași.

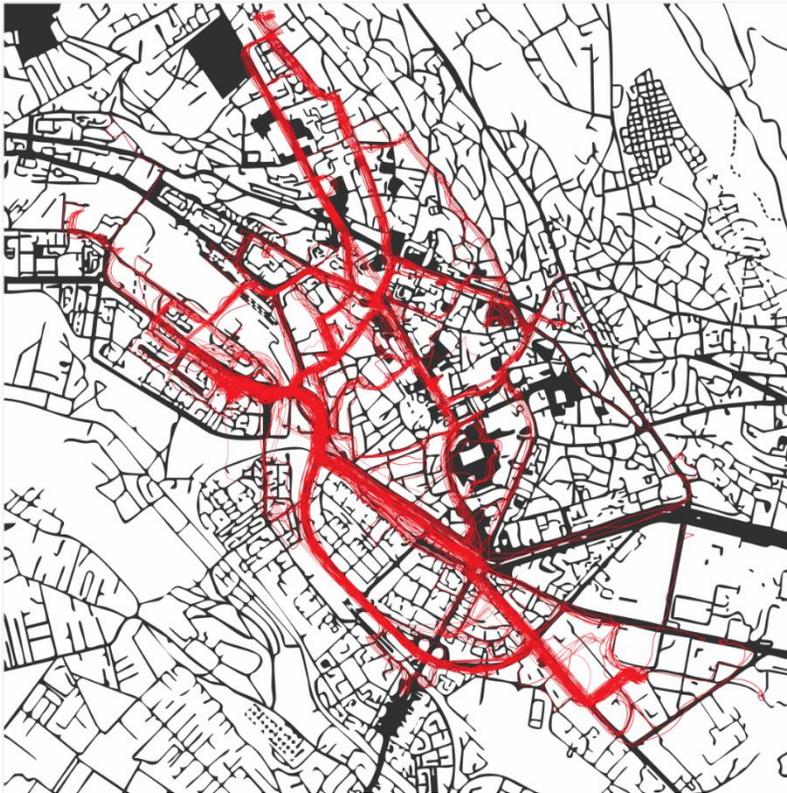


Fig. 1 The route illustrated according to the Google Maps History for 12 months

Based on these observations, I set out to intentionally walk this route, transforming it into a conscious exploration of urban space. The goal was to observe what aesthetic aspects predominate in these areas, how they influence the

perception of the city, and what type of visual images define the everyday space of those who cross it daily. In this process, I focused on both architectural elements and artistic interventions, as well as ephemeral visual elements, such as the urban orientation system, advertisements, the type of commercial spaces and the image associated with them.

So, after the first walk through the space, I noticed a prevalence of eclecticism in the overall image, referring both to the architecture and to the uneven chromatic palette of the blocks and to the crowding of advertising images that influence the appearance of the space not only visually, but also psychologically and ideologically. The contrast between the architectural elements and the uncontrolled overlapping of advertisements contribute to a fragmented perception of the urban landscape, in which the aesthetics seem to be dominated by a chaotic mix of styles and messages.

This analysis of the urban visual landscape cannot be separated from the historical and economic context that has shaped cities in their distinctive ways. While the exploration of advertising messages reveals subtle structures of influence on collective perception, the architectural and social legacy that has led to the current urban aesthetic must also be taken into account. Thus, the eclectic appearance of Eastern European cities is not only the result of recent trends, but also of a complex historical process, marked by economic transitions, ideological changes and successive reinterpretations of public space.

Although the trend towards universalizing urban images prevails in contemporary cities, there is, however, a local specificity that remains evident in the comparison between Eastern and Western Europe. Thus, the kitsch of Western cities, largely influenced and propagated by tourism, is different from the kitsch of the East, which, due to the historical context and accumulated economic gaps, has a special specificity.

Cultural, geographical and economic factors underlie this aesthetic differentiation, but the emphasis on individualization, characteristic of capitalism remains the same and is determined by acceleration, exaggeration, hedonism and simulacrum, perpetuating the condition of the “pressed individual”. This fact forms a very sharp contrast between the desires of the individual and the urban environment. The desires of the individual are synchronized with the globalized culture due to the compression of distances through the means of communication. In contrast, the local urban space fails to keep up with these trends, which leads to fragmented development, because local regulations are not sufficiently innovative nor adapted to the needs of communities, the values promoted at a global level not being uniformly absorbed from an aesthetic point of view.

This contrast is observed due to the historical legacy and the lack of adaptation to current needs. In Romania, the irregularities in urban space have their origin in the past, when the enthusiasm of the communist authority for socialist constructions prevailed, which modified the appearance of cities through the

“main piece” - the apartment block - multiplied endlessly⁴. Initially, the construction of apartment buildings was limited to the outskirts of the city, and then spread to historic urban centres.

The need for reconstruction after the 1977 earthquake encouraged the authorities to completely change the urban image of both the capital (the first architectural project being materialized in the People’s House)⁵, and other cities throughout the country.⁶ The urban phenomenon was also amplified by forced urbanization, for the economic benefit of the country, but to the detriment of the identity of the spaces, since it was envisaged to settle people in "semi-urban" localities with the same dominant constructivist aesthetic. The abolition of villages was a sufficient reason to trigger international concerns that this action would mean a violation of civil and political rights⁷ and would cause irreparable damage to aspects of the cultural heritage that European countries share in common.

Thus, urban aesthetics came to promote “socialist realist” values, materialized in “blocks of sinister buildings, uniform in their greyness”⁸, which have become deeply anachronistic in relation to contemporary life.

It is a natural process that values valid for some generations are no longer current for future generations, but if these are viewed through the prism of denial and not through the prism of historical values, then the problem of the anachronistic factor comes in. The subjectivity towards this phenomenon lies in the degree of nostalgia of the collective memory.

⁴ Lucian Boia (2016). *Strania Istorie a comunismului românesc (și nefericitele ei consecințe)* [The strange history of Romanian Communism (and its unfortunate consequences)], Editura Humanitas, București, passim.

⁵ “The trigger for the widespread demolitions was the 1977 earthquake, which devastated many cities, primarily the capital, and especially its central area. A thought struck Ceaușescu: if we're going to rebuild, then let's do it all the way. Let's build a new Bucharest in place of the old one!... First of all, a new Center had to be built. For this purpose, the choice fell on the most picturesque area of old Bucharest, the only one with a somewhat more accidental relief (Arsenal Hill), dotted with traditional houses in the most diverse styles, with gardens, churches and monasteries... Over 9,000 buildings were razed, on an area of 450 hectares. What's more, the hills and the irregularities of the relief disappeared: everything was flattened! In the middle rose the gigantic People's House (now the Palace of Parliament)...” *Ibidem*, p. 150.

⁶ Dinu C. Giurescu (2016), documented this phenomenon, noting that “29 cities were demolished to a proportion of 85-90% and rebuilt with standard buildings (a few before 1977, but the vast majority after that year) and another 37 cities, starting with Bucharest, were affected to a somewhat smaller extent, but large enough to disfigure them.”, *apud* Lucian Boia (2016), *Strania istorie a comunismului românesc și nefericitele ei consecințe* [The strange history of Romanian Communism (and its unfortunate consequences)], Editura Humanitas, București, p. 57.

⁷ “The British Government fears that the destruction of half of the existing villages in Romania and the forcible relocation of their inhabitants, as envisaged, will lead to serious violations of fundamental human rights” (letter from Geoffrey Howe, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to his Romanian counterpart). *Ibidem*, p. 78.

⁸ Titu Popescu (2013). *Estetica urbană* [Urban Aesthetics], Editura Ecou Transilvan, Cluj Napoca, p. 6.

When things are devalued as soon as they are taken out of historical context, then the problem of kitsch comes in. Herman Istvan mentions that “Historically, authentic values are not devalued at all, only conventional values, namely those based on conventional lies.”⁹ The anachronistic phenomenon of the inherited communist urban image in relation to contemporary values and trends is represented by the eclecticism that occurs at the level of urban planning and aestheticisation¹⁰.

Urban eclecticism, in this context, has a pejorative connotation, being the result of unsystematic and stylistically incoherent interventions that lead to visual fragmentation and loss of spatial harmony. This type of eclecticism is distinct from intentional architectural eclecticism, which became a style in its own right in the 19th century, along with academic trends in architecture.

Intentional architectural eclecticism involved the controlled selection and combination of elements from various historical styles (Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, etc.), with the aim of creating a unified and refined aesthetic, subordinated to rigorous compositional principles. This phenomenon manifested itself not only in architecture, but also in other artistic fields, such as decorative art, interior design and even painting, where eclecticism was used to harmonize diverse influences into a coherent whole.

Unlike this directed eclecticism, the one encountered in the contemporary urban landscape of former communist countries is chaotic, marked by overlapping styles, materials and colours without a guiding principle. The result is an aesthetic amalgam in which the coexistence of old and new elements is not achieved through harmonious integration, but through an accidental juxtaposition, determined by economic factors, the lack of a coherent urban vision and unstructured consumer trends. In this sense, eclecticism becomes a symptom of the visual and identity degradation of urban space, losing the aesthetic and conceptual values it had in the past.

However, eclecticism in the pejorative sense does not automatically overlap with the phenomenon of kitsch, but rather generates an incoherent overall image, which creates the sensation of kitsch or imposes a perception on it. The lack of visual unity and fragmentary aestheticisation produce an artificial atmosphere, which can be perceived as kitsch, but this aspect remains subjective and

⁹ Herman Istvan (1973). *Kitsch-ul, fenomen al pseudoartei* [Kitch, a phenomenon of pseudoart], Editura Politică, București, p. 77.

¹⁰ The aspect of eclecticism in urban aestheticisation oscillates between the concepts discussed by Jean Baudrillard in “The System of Objects”, namely “arrangement” and “decoration”. Although these two concepts refer to the interior space, the meaning of “decoration”, which represents that excess of significance of the surrounding objects, can be adapted to the urban space and would translate into artificial decorations for consumption and tourism, being aesthetic symbols lacking a real function. Likewise, the concept of “arrangement”, which is based on order and reason, reflecting a functional order, adapted to the urban environment, can be interpreted as a functional logic that responds to the needs of the inhabitants.

interpretable. On the one hand, there is a democratic position towards its inevitability, which claims that contemporary urban eclecticism is an inevitable reality of the process of development and diversification of cities, an expression of stylistic freedom¹¹. On the other hand, there is a radical position, such as that expressed by Gustavo Giovannoni, who considers chaotic eclecticism to be a degrading factor for urban identity, advocating for a clear and unitary intervention in the aestheticisation of the city¹².

Thus, urban eclecticism, with its many facets, becomes a bridge between the deliberate expressions of the past and modern interventions to compensate for urban monotony.

This transition from an intentional to a chaotic aesthetic highlights the paradox in which interventions in public spaces not only reflect cultural and historical influences, but can also create a perception of *kitsch*. Specifically, sequential interventions in the East fit into this framework, but without reducing the complexity of cultural and historical phenomena to a simple generalization.

This phenomenon is explained by the sequential interventions in public spaces in Eastern European cities, to compensate for the grey monotony of the cities, and this practice does nothing but continue the tradition of *kitsch*¹³.



Fig. 2 Aesthetic dissonances caused by the fragmented renovation of residential buildings

¹¹ “Beyond the generalized aesthetics of historical imitation, eclecticism paradoxically hides an inventiveness and freedom of creation, becoming the most consistent and systematic expression of modernity.” M. Criticos (2018), *Modernitatea arhitecturală și modelul istoric* [Architectural modernity and the historical model], in *Confluente arhitecturale* [Architectural confluences], Ozalid, București, p. 91.

¹² “If one persists in making the core of the old city center the new center of the city, it is condemned to destruction, immediately or slowly. Although immediate destruction seems to be a harsh solution, it would at least respond to the logic of modernization; on the other hand, the slow death and gradual substitution of the old streets and buildings brings with it, by breaking up the stages of realization, such an inorganicity of the routes and the implementation of the urban program that it makes it ineffective, never being able to result in a truly modern urban system.”, Gustavo Giovannoni (2016), *Chestiunea centrelor vechi* [The issue of old centres], in *Orașele vechi și noul urbanism* [Old cities and new urban planning], Gemma, București, p. 165.

¹³ Liviu Alexa, *Marele kitsch al orașelor meschine* [The great kitch of mean cities], 2014, retrieved from: <https://ziardecluj.ro/marele-kitsch-al-meschinelor-orase/>

Kitsch, especially urban *kitsch*, is a consequence of these geographically contextualized historical dynamics. A good example is the small towns of Eastern Europe, which are strewn with urban clichés (benches in all the parks, colourful pansies, Christmas decorations present even in summer, etc.), due to errors in the system responsible for planning and territorial development. The fact that the post-communist period was marked by urban chaos determined by the re-actualization of values and ideological reorientation, the fact that the field of urban planning did not benefit from the same experiences of innovation as in the West, the fact that the nostalgia of the collective memory for the "beauty" of the past is still alive and the fact that the degree of culture in terms of aesthetic "taste" is different have kept the specificity of the urban image at a limited level. Basically, the visual clutter created by the distinct elements, which do not necessarily have the *kitsch* label, is what creates the sensation of a "*kitsch* space", and the eclectic disharmony of the city amplifies the experience of urban chaos.

The lack of clear urban control mechanisms and the absence of an integrated vision for the development of public space have led to a fragmented accumulation of styles, materials and functions that coexist without an ordering principle. Thus, *kitschification* is no longer just a stage of exploration, but becomes an endemic phenomenon, transforming the urban landscape into a dissonant collage, where architectural and advertising elements come into visual conflict.

Aggressive illuminated signs coexist with deteriorated historic facades, modernist structures are squeezed between chaotically constructed buildings, and urban furniture reflects an accumulation of improvised solutions rather than an urban design thought out for the community. In this context, urban *kitsch* becomes not only a symptom of transition, but a new visual norm, marked by aesthetic dissonances and a fragmentation that reflects, in turn, the social and economic contradictions of the local space. Blocks of flats renovated in a diverse range of colors do not respect a chromatic coherence, thus emphasizing the feeling of visual disorder. Each individual intervention on the facades, from asymmetrically closed balconies to the chaotic replacement of windows and the fragmented painting of the block, by which you can identify the recently renovated apartments, contributes to a lack of uniformity that makes the city seem like an unstructured collage of styles and materials.

In the absence of clear regulations and an urban strategy that prioritizes visual harmony, the dominant principle of urban planning becomes the idea of "standing out". This phenomenon is not specific only to housing, but also extends to office buildings, where extravagant geometries are brutally juxtaposed with historical architecture, without a natural transition between old and new. The urban landscape thus becomes a field of visual competition, where each architectural or commercial element tries to attract attention, without considering the coherence of the ensemble.



Fig. 3 Eclectic urban area caused by architectural interventions

The same logic applies to small commercial spaces – kiosks and makeshift shops, each with its own aesthetic that ignores any effort to integrate into the general urban landscape. These are often painted in garish colours, dressed in oversized billboards, or covered in chaotically pasted posters, which intensifies the feeling of visual suffocation.

Urban advertising further exacerbates this visual chaos. Banners, LED screens and oversized billboards not only invade public space, but also compete aggressively with architecture, cancelling out any possibility of aesthetic balance. This agglomeration of visual messages superimposed on an already fragmented urban landscape causes the city to lose its unitary identity, becoming a mosaic of disparate styles and contradictory visual stimuli.

Thus, without a coherent urban development strategy, the city's aesthetics are abandoned in favour of an uncontrolled eclecticism, in which each intervention – be it architectural, commercial or advertising – is guided more by the desire to capture immediate attention than by the need for harmonious integration into the urban landscape.

This lack of coherence is amplified by the effects of globalization, which introduce standardized architectural and aesthetic models, often without a filter adapted to the local specifics. Instead of favouring a dialogue between old and new, between traditional and modern, these external influences chaotically overlap the existing urban structure, emphasizing visual fragmentation and the blurring of

local identity. Instead of a coherent integration of global influences, cities become a mixture of disparate architectural styles, in which local identity is eroded by imported and standardized aesthetics.

At the same time, “copy-paste” urbanism accentuates the sense of discontinuity. In the rush to modernization, many Eastern European cities adopt architectural models and aesthetics without critical filtering, applying solutions designed for other geographical and cultural contexts. Thus, the city develops through disparate additions, without a clear direction, which creates a fragmented image, where styles enter into competition instead of dialogue.

Another dimension of globalization is visual consumerism, reflected in the chaotic aesthetics of commercial spaces. International retail chains and shopping malls impose their own visual language, breaking any connection with the pre-existing urban aesthetic. Instead of commercial spaces being integrated into a coherent framework, they become islands of globalization, where the only rule is to attract attention through garish colours, exaggerated shapes and aggressive branding.

Globalized tourism adds another pressure on the city, causing superficial aesthetic remodelling. Historic areas are transformed into commercial settings, where old facades are artificially restored, and public spaces are adapted for visitors rather than for city residents. This process generates a simulated urban image, where authenticity is replaced by well-packaged kitsch for tourist consumption.

In this context, kitsch imposed by the authorities becomes a form of aesthetics that not only ignores diversity, but can also suppress the authenticity of the urban experience. It is no longer just a matter of “bad taste,” but a choice that can limit the expressiveness and life of the community, reducing public space to a uniform and impersonal form.

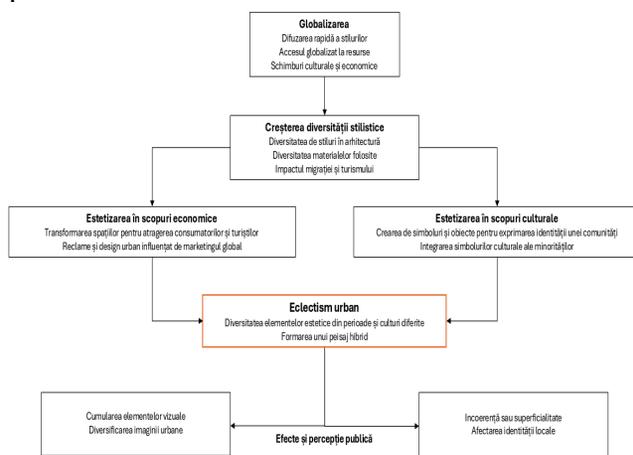


Fig. 4 The scheme represents the impact of globalization on urban stylistic diversification, highlighting how aestheticization for economic and cultural purposes generates an urban eclecticism marked by visual contrast and aesthetic fragmentation.

	<p>Globalisation Quick diffusion of styles Globalised access to resources Cultural and economic exchange</p>	
	<p>An increase in stylistic diversity Diversity of styles in architecture Diversity of materials used Impact of migration and tourism</p>	
<p>Aestheticisation for economic purposes Transforming spaces in order to attract consumers and tourists Ads and urban design influenced by global marketing</p>		<p>Aestheticisation for cultural purposes Creating symbols and objects to express a community's identity Integrating cultural symbols of minorities</p>
	<p>Urban eclecticism A diversity of aesthetic elements from various periods and cultures The formation of a hybrid landscape</p>	
<p>The accumulation of visual elements The diversification of the urban image</p>	<p>Effects and public perception:</p>	<p>Incoherence or superficiality The local identity being affected</p>

Fig. 4 bis The scheme represents the impact of globalization on urban stylistic diversification, highlighting how aestheticization for economic and cultural purposes generates an urban eclecticism marked by visual contrast and aesthetic fragmentation.

Herman Istvan emphasises that what was understood as “old kitsch” was representative of urban culture, shaped by local ideologies and characterized by intense patriotism, in which external influences were limited to a few “exotic” elements intended to introduce fragments of foreign culture¹⁴.

¹⁴ “Older *kitsch* exploited the real requirement of the appropriation of a new culture, offering instead an accelerated pseudo-appropriation “by the minute”. This was true of urban culture, because of which *kitsch* acquired a somewhat local patriotic character. From “Budapest, Budapest how wonderful you are” to the glorification of the Victorian era, the narrow local patriotic character of *kitsch* had been disturbed at most by exoticism.” Herman Istvan (1973). *Kitsch-ul, fenomen al pseudoartei* [Kitch, a phenomenon of pseudoart], Editura Politică, București, p. 227.

In contrast, the contemporary individual, constantly exposed to the global offer and accustomed to it, exceeds the “limits of local patriotism”¹⁵ and adopts universal aesthetic standards. Thus, it subordinates itself to the trends dictated by global fashion, which define its lifestyle, ephemeral values and visual preferences. In this way, local consumer culture is no longer an organic process, but is rapidly aligning itself to the universal scale, gradually eliminating regional particularities and the authenticity of urban spaces.

In the contemporary urban landscape, visual competition is an inevitable reality. Every architectural, commercial or cultural element fights to attract attention and impose itself in the dynamics of the city. This competition, however, is exponentially amplified by omnipresent advertising, which not only intensifies the sensation of visual chaos, but also profoundly redefines the way in which residents perceive and experience urban space.

Billboards, digital screens and large-scale advertisements overlap the city's architectural identity, transforming the streets into a fragmented visual spectacle dominated by commercial imperatives¹⁶. Thus, urban aesthetics are shaped not only by the functional requirements of the city, but also by aggressive marketing strategies, which transform public space into a battlefield for visibility “through quantity and competition of ‘who has the biggest mesh’”¹⁷.

Through semiosis, street advertisements exploit cultural symbols, colours, and recognizable images, instantly capturing the attention of viewers. Moreover, advertising representation is not limited to simply reflecting reality, but shapes it, inducing associations between products and idealized lifestyles. The physical, social, and psychological context in which advertising messages are placed influences their meaning and impact¹⁸, consolidating their status as mechanisms of influence and manipulation of consumption. Thus, the city becomes not only a place of social interaction, but also an environment saturated with commercial stimuli, in which the boundaries between necessity and desire are often dictated by advertising discourse.

Although street advertising is designed to attract attention and stimulate consumption, its effects on urban aesthetics are often invasive and chaotic, contributing to the degradation of the city's visual image. Billboards, oversized banners, haphazardly pasted posters and large-scale illuminated screens create a

¹⁵ Herman Istvan (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹⁶ “The city has become a temple of consumerism, reduced to the role of support for the great ‘icons’ interceding between our pockets and those who sell us illusions and objects.” Augustin Ioan, *Publicitatea în oraş* [Advertising in the city], in *Inquest for Igloo* by Viorica Buică, November, 2005, retrieved from: <https://www.igloo.ro/publicitatea-in-oras/>

¹⁷ Mihai Ghyka (2005). *Publicitatea în oraş* [Advertising in the city], in *Inquest for Igloo* by Viorica Buică, November; retrieved from: <https://www.igloo.ro/publicitatea-in-oras/>

¹⁸ Thomas A. Sebeok (2002). *Semnele: o introducere în semiotică* [*Signs: an introduction to semiotics*], translated by Sorin Mărculescu, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, passim.

fragmented and overloaded visual landscape, in which architectural balance and urban identity are often sacrificed in favour of aggressive commercial display¹⁹.

	FORMAL ADVERTISING	INFORMAL ADVERTISING	UNCONVENTIONAL ADVERTISING
	(LED ads, oversaturated billboards)	(Low aesthetic quality posters, copies of ads)	(Guerrilla marketing, sponsored graffiti and stencil work)
Iconic image	Oversaturated visual hyper-reality; strong colours and intermittent images to draw attention	Improvised visual fragments created without any aesthetic preoccupation; it turns urban furniture and walls into poster areas for low level economy	Aggressive, contrasting or ironic images; they appear in the urban landscape under the pretext of art; instruments of marketing in disguise
Context sign (index)	Placed in busy areas; creates a chaotic landscape; reflects the financial status of the area; encourages consumerism and monopolises the attention of the public.	Its massive presence in bus stops and building entrance areas signals the lack of city planning regulations; contributes to a disorganised, ephemeral aesthetics.	Its placement in unexpected areas causes a shock reaction or the involuntary acceptance of the disguised commercial message.
Conventional sign (symbol)	Creates an idealised city image; leads to a forced homogenisation of the public space.	Indicates a precarious urban landscape; the economic survival and informality is more important than the city aesthetics.	Visually reinterprets urban culture; indicates a commercial branding tool.

Fig. 5 Semiotic classification of advertising in the public space

One of the most obvious negative effects of street advertising is visual overcrowding. Streets, buildings and urban infrastructure are covered with advertisements that do not respect stylistic coherence, generating a chaotic and suffocating visual environment. In many cases, large-scale advertising hides historic facades, alters the perspective of the built space and eliminates architectural landmarks, reducing the city to a succession of aggressive commercial messages. A city suffocated by aggressive advertising can become

¹⁹ “Massive sculptural ensembles, ideologically imprinted mural art with more or less happy aesthetic achievements have today been replaced by a huge amount of advertising.” Marilena Preda Sânc, Ioan Stendl, *Arta în spațiul public* [Art in the public space], Cetatea de Scaun, București, 2007, p. 24.

an indistinct terrain, devoid of personality, in which the defining elements of the urban landscape are blurred by the excessive overlap of commercial messages.

Another negative effect is the symbolic privatization of public space, becoming an environment dominated by commercial interests. Instead of the city being a place of authentic social interactions, art and cultural identity, it is transformed into a battlefield for commercial visibility. Instead of community messages or artistic interventions that humanize the space, building facades and transit spaces are monopolized by advertisements that impose a one-way discourse based on consumption.

But referring to the local reality, I notice that the advertising in the urban space of Iași does not just represent an additional visual layer to the urban landscape, an aesthetic dissonance in its context, but functions as a semiotic code that reflects the socio-economic structure of the city.

Street advertising can be viewed beyond its decorative “quality”²⁰ and psychologically, it contributes to shaping the collective perception of public space, generating a fragmented landscape, where the contrast between consumerist messages and the daily realities of local communities becomes evident. Through a semiotic analysis, it can be observed how advertising not only encourages certain consumption patterns, but also influences the way residents interact with the city, determining an urban experience dominated by commercial stimuli.

Trying to understand this impact on a visual, behavioural and psychological level, I analysed urban space through the lens of the drift method, mapping areas with excessive advertising and how they influenced my perception and experience of living in the city. In this process of subjectively mapping the space, I was influenced by the message displayed by Google Maps regarding saving the timeline, which emphasizes that user paths can influence estimates of the impact of ads²¹. This detail led me to look at the city not just as an ensemble of routes and points of interest, but as a territory encoded by commercial messages, where the perception of places is inevitably shaped by advertising discourse.

²⁰ “How can I say that a mesh is terrible when it's spread out over an even more terrible building? At least the mesh has some bright colors that, possibly, liven up the grayness of the dormitory neighborhoods.” Costi Rogozanu (2005). *Publicitatea în oraș (Advertising in the city)*, in *Inquest for Igloo* by Viorica Buică, November, retrieved from: <https://www.igloo.ro/publicitatea-in-oras/>

²¹ “Users who use History and visit businesses can influence their estimates of the impact of their ads based on history data” (text from the message displayed in the Google Maps app when saving history is enabled, informing users about how their data may influence ad impact estimates.).

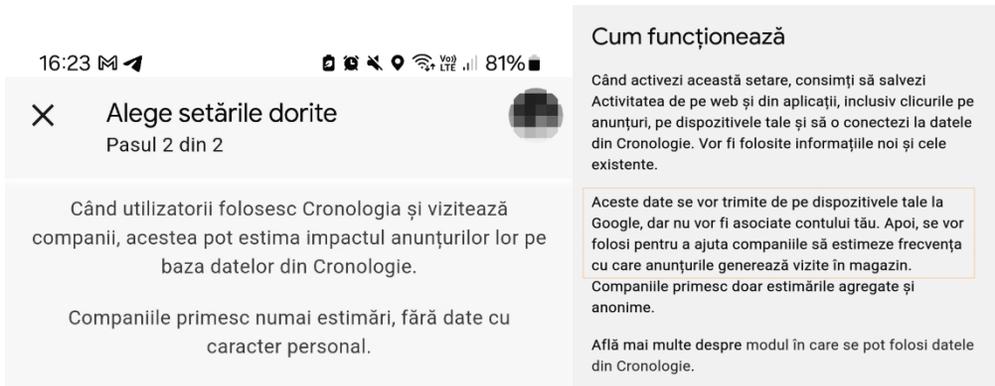


Fig. 6 Message displayed in the Google Maps app when saving history is enabled, informing users about how their data may influence ad impact estimates

Thus, I tried to synthesize the dominant concepts in each area based on advertising, observing how certain types of advertisements and commercial images are repeated according to the specifics of the space. In particular, I noted the recurrence of a commercial pattern on the ground floor of the blocks, structured around a repetitive succession of pharmacies, pawnshops and gambling halls, with occasional variations given by cafes or barbershops. This uniform distribution of commercial functions in the peripheral neighbourhoods not only reflects a specific economic reality, but also contributes to a standardized perception of the city, influencing the interaction of residents with the built environment and urban dynamics. Moreover, it accentuates the contrast of the urban image between the central and peripheral areas of the city.

COMMERCIAL SPACES	Iconic image	Context sign (index)	Conventional sign (symbol)
Commercial advertising in neighbourhood on the edge of town	A repetitive succession of pharmacies, pawn shops, and gambling halls	The way in which these commercial spaces are grouped together reflects the economic precariousness of the area	It suggests a financially vulnerable community, where survival is more important than aspirational consumption
Commercial advertising in neighbourhood in the centre	A variety of premium ads, including international brands, restaurants, coffee shops, cultural events, luxury shops	The way these spaces are placed creates a sophisticated urban landscape, associated with modern lifestyles and an exclusive consumption	It sends a message of prosperity and cosmopolitan life, suggesting that people belong to a higher social stratum and have access to refined consumption experiences

Fig. 7 Semiotic perspective on the advertising contrast between central and peripheral neighborhoods

This suffocating chain of commercial functions, where pharmacies, pawn shops and gambling halls are obsessively repeated, reflects not only a lack of urban diversity, but also a local economy focused on the social vulnerabilities of the community. In many neighbourhoods, these commercial spaces are not the result of a planning thought out for the needs of the inhabitants, but rather a consequence of a demand dictated by financial precariousness and dependency.

The chaotic distribution of commercial functions not only highlights the economic differences between the city areas, but also deeply affects the aesthetic coherence of the urban space. In the central districts of Iași, an attempt at visual unification is observed by using a neutral chromaticity – the commercial ground floors being predominantly black. This strategy seems, at first glance, logical for protecting the architectural image of the central area. Through such a regulation, the aim is for the commercial spaces on the ground floors of historical buildings not to compete visually with the period details and to create a coherent ensemble, subordinate to the heritage. In theory, this measure should discipline the visual chaos, temper the aggressiveness of street advertising and provide a discreet elegance to the urban centre.

However, in practice, this strategy proves insufficient and ineffective and fails to maintain a coherent visual order. The diversity of shop windows, the differences in height of the commercial spaces, the variations in the materials used and the multitude of typographic styles compete visually in a fragmented urban landscape. In addition, this so-called aestheticisation is disrupted by the green shop windows of the pharmacies, which break the chromatic monotony, and by the excessive presence of individual advertisements, each brand trying to visually dominate the space to the detriment of a harmonious whole. Instead of the spontaneous diversity, characteristic of a city in constant motion, an artificial contrast has been created between the forced sobriety of the facades and the uncontrolled exuberance of the advertisements. The lack of strict application of the rules and the absence of coherent control over the materials used, the dimensions and the positioning of the advertising elements transform this attempt at visual ordering into a superficial convention, without the desired effect.

In the peripheral neighbourhoods, the urban aesthetic is further assaulted by a chromatic explosion and a suffocating visual redundancy. Here, the ground floors of the blocks are dominated by red, yellow and green – the typical colours of pawnshops, gambling halls and pharmacies, each trying to attract attention through strident contrasts. This visual invasion is amplified by the practice of hyper-repetition of the store name, which appears four or five times on the same window, so that it is visible from every angle. Instead of contributing to a coherent landscape, this overlay of aggressive graphic elements creates an effect of visual overload, where each commercial unit competes for visibility to the detriment of an urban harmony.

Unlike central commercial spaces, where visual identity control is attempted, the urban periphery becomes a terrain of chromatic and typographic chaos, reflecting not only the absence of a coherent urban vision, but also an economy of survival, in which aesthetics are sacrificed in favour of immediate commercial visibility. This phenomenon of excessive branding is repeated both inside and outside public transport or on the entire facade of the building²².

This increasingly common phenomenon in the contemporary urban landscape – wrapping buildings in advertising – is a practice that has become almost a commercial tradition in cities like Iași. Whether it is old blocks of flats at busy intersections or the facades of buildings undergoing renovation, these surfaces are transformed into gigantic billboards, where commercial messages completely cover the architecture, canceling out any trace of visual identity of the city (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Buildings covered in huge ads

²² “You ride the bus like you're inside a plastic bag and you can't see anything because it's completely wrapped in the advertisement for a beer, two beers. You can't see anything from the apartment either, because the facade of the interwar block of flats is entirely covered by the thighs of the perfect diva retouched in Photoshop. You can't even see the red dot that says that the block of flats and the advertisement will fall at the first earthquake, so everything is fine, people can live in peace further on. The people of Bucharest no longer see Bucharest.” Dan Perjovschi, *Publicitatea în oraș* [Advertising in the city], in *Inquest for Igloo* by Viorica Buică, November, 2005; retrieved from: <https://www.igloo.ro/publicitatea-in-oras/>

This trend deeply affects the urban image, contributing to the aesthetic disorganization of public space. First of all, the architectural identity of the city is completely erased, the buildings becoming simple supports for oversized advertisements. The architectural details, which could define the urban character, disappear under the layer of advertising meshes, and the city becomes a transient environment, in which the commercial function takes precedence over the aesthetic one (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11 Buildings covered in huge ads

The hugeness of commercial messages produces an aggressive visual competition, in which each advertisement tries to dominate the urban landscape, modifying the visual hierarchy of the city, covering architectural landmarks and eliminating any aesthetic coherence. Unlike a city where architecture and public space are defining elements, cities suffocated by advertising become chaotic visual agglomerations, where urban perception is dominated by omnipresent commercial stimuli.

This visual fragmentation is accentuated by the lack of coherent regulations imposing limits on the size and placement of advertisements on buildings. In many cases, these huge banners are placed on dilapidated buildings, under the pretext of masking facades in an advanced state of deterioration. However, instead of this solution being temporary, it becomes permanent, as owners prefer to continue the economic exploitation of the facades by renting the space for advertising. Thus, the buildings are not renovated, so instead of contributing to the aestheticisation of the city, this phenomenon reinforces the image of a disorganized and transient urban landscape.

From an economic point of view, this practice is supported by the high profitability of outdoor advertising. In the absence of clear restrictions, facades become exploitable commercial resources, and building owners – be they tenants' associations, private companies or real estate developers – rent them out for considerable sums. Thus, immediate economic interest prevails over a long-term urban vision, and the aesthetics of the city are sacrificed in favour of commercial visibility.

Another reason for the perpetuation of this phenomenon is the social acceptance of invasive advertising. As this type of advertising has become ubiquitous, city dwellers have become accustomed to it, perceiving it as a “normal” part of the urban landscape. This habit reduces public pressure on the administration to implement strict regulations and, implicitly, allows the phenomenon to continue without significant opposition.

Finally, the impact on the perception of public space is profound. Instead of having a direct visual relationship with the city’s architecture, passers-by are forced to interact with an environment dominated by commercial “over-messages”, in which advertising becomes more important than the built space. The city is reduced to a commercial support, and people become passive spectators of an artificial landscape, lacking aesthetic coherence.

In this context, the connection between the phenomenon of invasive street advertising and the phenomenon of *kitsch* is made by the profound aesthetic impact on the urban image, as the advertising chaos actively participates in the *kitschification* of the city. From the oversaturated shop windows in the suburbs, to the buildings completely covered in advertisements and the fragmented commercial landscape, the city becomes a chaotic visual collage, where each element competes for the attention of passers-by, without an aesthetic or functional logic.

Kitsch, by definition, represents a visual excess, an overload of stimuli that, instead of creating a harmonious whole, generates dissonance and artificiality. The same thing happens in the urban space affected by the aggressive nature of advertising. Thus, we can register urban oversaturation, artificiality or the aesthetics of the simulacrum, by imitating Western aesthetic models without a coherent integration²³. This makes the urban aesthetic, as a whole, become fragmented, artificial and redundant, sacrificing the city's identity in favour of a ubiquitous *kitsch*.

Conclusion

Ultimately, contemporary urban aesthetics remains marked by visual fragmentation, invasive advertising and chaotic eclecticism, reflecting a

²³ The attempt to impose a “refined” image through the black floors of central shops, inspired by the aesthetics of Western retail, but disrupted by architectural differences, uneven storefronts and discordant visual inserts.

profound crisis of identity and coherence in the organization of public space. The city is increasingly becoming an unbalanced visual collage, in which architectural, commercial and symbolic elements coexist without a common guiding thread. In the absence of an integrated urban vision, urban kitsch is no longer a simple expression of “bad taste”, but a consequence of the social, economic and cultural dynamics of transition. These dissonances affect not only the image of the city, but also the emotional and perceptual relationship of the inhabitants with the space they cross daily. The analysis of these phenomena, through subjective methods such as drift, highlights the need for critical reflection on the way we build, aestheticize and experience the city. In a context in which the urban landscape is becoming increasingly artificial and standardized, the revaluation of coherence, local identity and authentic expressiveness becomes an aesthetic and social urgency.

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